

Imperfections



SHADOWMUN

Chapter 1

School had been all fun and games. Enough to let go, enough to forget. Enough to be himself to the point that he lost it, that it wasn't all fun and games anymore, that the darkness, Sirius brought with him took over and turned over the world.

He knew he had done wrong. Terribly, terribly wrong. So insanely wrong, even he cannot decide, what is worse. Aiming to kill, maim, destroy someone, no matter how despised and hated, or using a friend to do so. It is all that is wrong with his family, with his past, with his whole being in a nutshell. They would approve of course. Applaud him for killing half-bloods who don't know their place, half-breeds who have no place in this world. They have made him, molded him into what he is.

He could gladly walk back and make them proud. Only... he hates it. Fought all his life, to get away from it, to free himself of it, to be better than that. And damn, had he failed in that. Had he failed as a friend too. At this point, one and a half months in, he had come to realize, he not only screwed it up majorly, but it was probably beyond repair, with Moony ignoring him completely, no matter what he did and Prongs and Wormtail giving him the cold shoulder, only ever even noticing him for a snide remark or an attempt to keep him out of Moony's hair.

He could go without most of it. Wormtail's attempts of humor, the whole group experience of playing pranks and going at the Slytherins, hell, even Moony's tentative tries to make them better people – and he loved those. What he couldn't afford to lose but had nonetheless, was Prongs' brotherly affection. The casual hugs, occasional slap on the back, the squeezing of his hand, when something seemed amiss. Those were the things, Sirius needed on a visceral level. He only trusted one person enough for those. And now, said person wouldn't do them anymore.

It was time for desperate measures.

Severus stepped into the room, wand drawn and cocked at the person waiting there, before even thinking twice. He knew things were off, when the other boy just sat slightly turned away, but looking in his direction, making no attempts to get his own wand in hand. With care Severus backed up against the wall, so they couldn't get behind him. There were always more than one of them, more than he could see. He didn't even know why he had come in the first place, it really smelled of a trap. But to be honest with himself: backing down wasn't an option.

“What do you want?” he sneered, trying to keep the whole room in sight, while his main focus

stayed on the bane of his existence, who looked uncharacteristically quiet, subdued even, the muscles of his face working around ineffable emotions.

The boy's eyes rested on the ground before Severus' feet, creating the illusion, he wouldn't feel worthy of his gaze even touching Severus' robes. While the Slytherin part of Severus knew for a fact it was quite the opposite. Sirius Black was nothing if not an arrogant prat, believing with all his heart to be above others, above Slytherins, where his own brother was one of them, above half-bloods and muggle-borns although he flaunted keeping their company. House Black produced nothing if not hubris and hypocrisy. Though most didn't even bother to pretend.

They looked down their noses at people like Severus, if they noticed them at all. Sirius Black *was* different. Different in the company he kept, different in the petty hostility he reserved for Severus, different in the fact he had tried to get him killed. Not that it felt any better than complete indifference.

"I want to speak with you..." Black told him softly, the vibration of sincerity and something else within his voice, his hesitation and nervousness lighting a longing in Severus, though he could not yet tell, for what. At the very least this might finally offer the opportunity to get back at the other. To hurt him, torture him, destroy him for all that he did in the past. "There is..." Black shook his head and tried anew, showing even more vulnerability. "I came to make amends."

"Amends?" Severus couldn't help but mock. "You can stuff your amends up yours, you arrogant prick. I give a whiff about your amends." His face distorted in disgust, he felt, though his Slytherin part already calculated how to use this, no matter, how disgraceful it was. And how unbelievable.

"That is..." Black swallowed, keeping it forcibly quiet. "... your prerogative of course. Though I preferred, you heard me out first." Severus felt mesmerized by the abashed little flicking of Black's tongue, wetting his lower lip.

But it wasn't that what made him gesture. "Go on then." He was too much of a Slytherin not to capture the opportunity.

"I..." Others probably found Black's hesitation endearing, he found it wasteful of his precious time and urged him on with a challenging nod. "I need your forgiveness. And I'll... do, what it takes."

"Whatever it takes?" Severus hissed intrigued. "Why would you do that?" He wouldn't jump into an obvious trap. If something looked to good to be true, it probably was. "Tell me the truth, if you really want that."

Black remained silent for a long time, though his eyes now lingered on Severus, gray and cold and grieving. Severus was almost ready to leave this ridiculous situation behind, when he finally made up his mind. "When... I can prove my conviction to... better myself, I might get the same chance with... them. My friends." The volume tapered into a whisper as the voice broke. "I don't pretend, this is about you. It isn't. But..." He shrugged. "I thought, you might jump at the chance to... make me pay." That sounded about right. It was exactly, what Severus wanted.

"Whatever it takes?" he asked again, a grin slowly spreading on his face. "You are up for quite the ride."

Black looked as afraid as he should have been.

"Meet me in the dungeons after curfew." That was, what Snape had told him, and of course it was a trap. Even if it wasn't it would be dangerous to go down there on his own, when he had lost usage of James' precious invisibility cloak. He could easily run into a teacher or Filch, and that would be the end of it. But in research for the Marauders' map Sirius had gained intimate knowledge of the castle, enabling him to go unseen most of the way, even when he fully expected to be met by a teacher and not Snape at the end of the journey.

It was a small price to pay for his peace of mind. To know he had tried and failed. To accept his future, his whole sanity no longer was in his own hand. He deserved it, he knew he did. Also knew, it had been inevitable from the moment he was born, but hope died a slow and painful death. And maybe fate had been more merciful with Regulus, who never had any, who had simply given in. But alas, he could not, he still had some fight left. Enough to go, enough to see for himself, what Snape had in mind as a payback.

Surprisingly the other boy awaited him, alone too, where he had had the chance to bring everyone without even breaking his word. When Sirius entered the room, they agreed on, he stood close, reaching out and demanding: "Your wand. If you mean it, hand it over."

Sirius didn't allow his breath to hitch, even when a stab of pure panic lurched through his body. Disappointingly easy the wand changed hands, disappearing from his sight and leaving him on the edge. He couldn't even ask to get it back at the end of it, was fully at Snape's mercy. "Whatever it takes." That had been a spectacularly bad and dangerous idea, yet he tried to act as unfazed as he possibly could.

He didn't even flinch, when Snape cast an Incarcerous. Where did the Slytherin even learn that one? Was it standard curriculum in the dungeons? Sirius only knew it, because it had been used *on* him, more times than he could count, but his casting of it was still sloppy. What would he need it for? Snape's spellwork on the other hand was immaculate, the bindings perfect to the point that he couldn't even move enough to chafe himself.

He did flinch, when the Slytherin reached out to right his collar, even the single touch of Snape's fingers with his skin conjuring fears aplenty. Suddenly his chest was constricted, making it difficult to draw even a single breath, the inhales and exhales shivering with strain. No one ever touched him. No one but James or possibly Remus. No one, he could trust enough, not to hurt, not to destroy. And Snape... was anything but trustworthy.

Sirius pressed his eyes together in the effort to regain composure, but it was too late. Snape had caught up and reached to run his knuckles along Sirius' cheeks, making him shiver and buckle, driving tears of impotent rage and fear into his eyes. "Look, what we have here..." He sounded disturbingly mesmerized.

Sirius shook in effort to find his bearings back. He didn't want Snape to know about that, but what had he expected? At one point or the other the Slytherin would touch him. Would find out, he could deal with pain, humiliation, the most grueling work, but not with simple, human touch, the joy of it beaten out of his system by constant reassurance nothing good ever, ever came out of it. No caress ever not followed by a slap, no kiss without the bite of pain. "Blacks aren't touched. Aren't touchable. We are sacrosanct." What a messed up philosophy, what a terrible burden.

But Snape didn't let him recover, continued those tiny contacts that had him reeling. Wiping back the hair from his face and placing the strands behind his ears, running fingertips over his quivering lips, resting his hand against the chest, until Sirius almost choked on his panic. "And here I thought, you kissed and screwed every gullible girl at school and about half the boys too."

"I did..." Sirius panted, barely able to form real words with what little air he had. And it was true, because *he* had been doing the touching. He had decided, what happened, he had called the shots, which at the most part meant: no reciprocation, just let me do my thing. There hadn't been any complaints either, Sirius was as good with that as with everything he set his mind to.

It made the Slytherin chuckle, all effortless cruelty. "Not the Slytherins though, I take it? So it's just us, producing such... strong reaction?"

Although he had it all wrong, Sirius was much tempted to nod, to lie, to lead him to all the wrong assumptions. But considering the situation he hesitated too long to make it believable anymore. "s not that..." He leaned his head back in an attempt to force at least some air back into his lungs.

To his relief Snape withdrew, eyeing him in suspicion. "No? What is it then, do I disgust you so incredibly, you can barely avoid fainting?" Sirius wasn't sure, if he meant it as a joke or dead serious, but neither was particularly advantageous for the further course of the night.

"Not that either. Could... could be anyone." He knew what he looked like, the eyes averted, the chest heaving, the face all tense. Utter disgrace. In a way it was fortunate, it was Snape after all. He could tell people whatever he wanted, with their known enmity no one would believe him.

The Slytherin stepped closer again, not quite repeating the process of winding Sirius up, merely suggesting it. "You might want to elaborate then..." His smirk was demonic.

Chapter 2

If that was, what Sirius Black looked like in the throes of passion, Severus knew why so few ever even tried to withstand his offers, the dark eyes hooded, the head thrown back, the whole body sweaty and taut, showing off his quidditch trained muscles. Severus found himself enticed by the view despite himself. Or maybe it was, because this wasn't arousal, wasn't passion, but fear?

He had never seen the likes of it in his adversary's face, not before this rather accidental contact. But now the other boy looked shaken by it, helpless, almost heart-breakingly so. It angered Severus that even desolate and beaten, Black looked nothing if not beautiful. It devastated him that it worked a charm even on him, even after all he had been through from the other's hands. He didn't want to feel pity, didn't feel inclined to mercy. Alas, he had to force his hand, had to fight his own instincts, vain as they were.

Why in Mordred's cursed name was it so hard, when Sirius Black deserved it, deserved it all? At least, it was a pleasant way to torture him, one that required little effort on his part, running his fingers over the other, until he broke sweat, until his trembling breath failed to provide him with enough air and his knees buckled, until he hung in the restraints of the Incarcerous spell like a puppet, the only muscles moving those in his face, oscillating between something like pain and pure despair.

"You know what, Black?" Severus whispered, right into his ears, making him jerk away. "I could get used to this. If I forgot it was your skin, it would actually feel somewhat nice." He edged even closer, allowing his body to slot against the other, who couldn't get any further away, his exhalations breaking like waves upon the skin of the other. "I have decided to be lenient. If you tell me, what this is about, I will let you off for today." It wasn't much of a sacrifice really – he was tired and he needed to plan to make full use of both Black's promise and his revelation, but still, the other sagged in relief, fighting to come up with enough air to talk.

"I don't ever... allow anyone... to touch" he choked out in hurried huffs. "Noone... I don't trust... I do the... touching. Is all."

Severus allowed his forehead to rest against Black's temple. "And how all the, you know... fucking?" It was almost a pity that Black was pretty tolerant to both genders, it would have been a bliss to use homophobia against him. But that was really more of a muggle problem, where magic could even solve... dynastic problems if need be.

"Told you." Black whimpered, his pulse fluttering under Severus hand, as he reached for Black's wrist. "I touch... they allow it. Nothing more." This explained so much of the rumors that Black was a rather demanding lover. Severus believed him. If Black still managed to lie, he deserved to get away with it.

"Finite incantatem" he intoned and canceled the spell that held Black up, the other boy falling heavily against him, then collapsing further, the resistance of Severus' body just enough to prevent the contact with the ground from being bone-breaking. He only stopped, lying face down, his whole body fighting to regain any resemblance of normality.

Severus placed the wand next to the outstretched hand, forcing the trembling fingers around it, then bowed down. "Friday at nightfall at the quidditch pitch. Right after dinner. Don't be late." He turned to leave, even opened the door, but let it fall shut again in confusion, when Black didn't move. Instead the trembles first turned to sobs, then subsided completely, the body lying disquietingly still. Worried Severus tiptoed back, checking on the other boy, finding him passed out from exhaustion. That were very bad news. The ground in the dungeons was cold. One could die lying on them for too long and Black was in no state to notice in time.

Severus grit his teeth and grimaced. He wasn't a murderer, and besides, it wouldn't do to let Black turn up dead with traces of his magic on his body. With a sigh he levitated the other boy onto a rickety desk that was stored in the dungeon, probably only because people were too lazy to actually vanish it, then conjured a blanket and placed it on top. That would do, until Black came back to senses.

Sirius eyes fluttered open. For an irritating moment he was back at Grimauld Place and Regulus was trying to wake him, before mother came up. He was terribly insistent as always, because the alternative was even worse. But this wasn't his room there and this wasn't his brother either. He shot up and almost tumbled down from a wooden surface, he couldn't quite identify. "Snape."

"Wake up, sunshine, unless you want to miss classes" the other boy said with absolutely no infliction of humor whatsoever.

Sirius watched him drowsily unable to decide, why he even bothered, especially after what had happened the night before. With that thought in mind, Snape felt suddenly uncomfortably close and he jerked away from him. "What the hell..."

"Ah, here we are. I'd recommend you make a stop at your dorm." Snape raised a brow and looked him up and down. "You look... ruffled."

Something in his tone made Sirius shiver and another rush of terror settled in his bones. "Listen, I..." he tried, licking his lips, but Snape, clearly aware, he had the upper hand interrupted him with a wave of his hand.

"Friday, Black. I do not intend to interfere with classes."

Sirius felt flooded with relief and jumped from the desk where he had been sleeping, eyeing the colorless blanket that remained there and looked not quite substantial anymore with furrowed brow. Had Snape... covered him? And why? He tried not to think of the question, took instead a very hurried leave, running back to Gryffindor tower for changing and a quick rinse, then to the Great Hall to get some rolls for breakfast. He made it just barely for Transfiguration, slipping into place in between James and Peter, who threw him strange looks but still refused to speak to him, even when they probably burned with curiosity where he had been.

Just now he didn't intend to tell them anything. He felt... immeasurably tired and sore, even when he was fine physically. And it wasn't safe to share with them anymore. He wouldn't get Moony's warm words and hot chocolate or Prongs' brotherly hugs. He was alone and cold.

Friday night brought a new sight, Severus hadn't anticipated. Sirius Black fidgeting wasn't something he expected. Again he hated the revelation that each step closer to his tormentor made him seem more human, less diabolic. That he had fears, pains, burdens beyond the obvious. That his life wasn't as carefree and nice as Severus had imagined.

Worse even, he had been warned, had he just been willing to see. The fact alone that Black would

lower himself to not only apologize but offer retribution beyond the reasonable was a big red flag right there. Happy people weren't that desperate, happy people didn't reveal their hearts content to people they despised on the mere hope, something good might come out of it. Happy people never even saw the pain they caused. People like Potter, probably. No more Sirius Black.

That boy waited out in the cold, his face pinched, hiding behind the locker rooms until he caught sight of Severus. "So" he began, quietly, as if not trusting his voice. He buried his hands deep in his pockets. "What have you planned?"

Severus stepped closer, noticing with deep satisfaction that Black receded before him. "Hand over your wand." With ease he backed the older, bigger, stronger boy against the wall. Again Black made no move of resistance, reached instead for his sheath and handed the strange square, rune-covered wood over.

"Good..." Severus nodded, putting it away carefully. He couldn't really tell, why it was important to show any goodwill, but intended not to let harm come to it. He then looked pensively. "Let's test your conviction. Kneel."

He had expected Black to make a fuss, even outright refuse, anything really, not the determined motion, ignoring all circumstances including the – if small – chance to be seen and the wetness of the ground soaking through his trousers and robe. The only signs of distress were the constant twitching of his mouth and the expression of his eyes.

This got continuously more uncomfortable. Especially with what Severus had wanted to say. But Black deserved it, didn't he? Every scrap of misery he felt was nothing compared to what he had done to others, Slytherins, his smaller brother, Severus before all. He swallowed and mustered all the anger he could find, all the spite. "You told me, all you ever had, where to your beck and call. So... I'd be a first to you. You'll always remember me. Like I remember the night..."

For the first time in their encounter this evening Black's eyes met his. "I'll *always* remember you, this." His voice shook and scratched. "But if that is, what you want..." His exhales couldn't have been more painful if his lungs were filled with blood. "Go ahead."

A sudden idea struck Severus, promising either complete damnation or a terrible salvation for the both of them. "Not like that. If... you pass out like last time, you won't remember it at all. We will have to work on your... composure first."

This time Severus could see the words sink in like poison, causing shivers and pain, purely psychic but no less real. Black lowered his eyes again, his head with them, completely beaten.

"That need not be a bad thing" Severus soothed, reaching for Black's shoulders in the attempt to make him stand up again. As the other boy followed the unspoken command, Severus couldn't resist the urge to run his fingers over his hair, that always looked so silky, so light, so unlike his own. Instantly Black's posture got even more tense, though he did not yet lose his restraint fully. Still, even from his higher position he looked properly cowed.

"It is true then" Severus inquired. "You really are scared out of your wits by something so simple as this?" He reached out, his hand brushing Black's collar. The resulting flinch was distinct. Black tried to glare to lessen its impact, playing on annoyed instead of fearful, but it was of no use. Severus wasn't fooled anymore.

"Relax" he whispered, coming close enough with his lips, Black felt his breath clearly, without actually touching. "Just stay calm."

There was nothing "just" about it. Black fought with every fiber to remain in place, his limbs shaking, his eyes and lips pressed shut, choking on his own breath repeatedly. Occasionally an embarrassing whimper escaped, as seconds ticked past.

After a while Severus took pity and drew back. Surprisingly he didn't need to move far to cause Black to relax some. It still was a long shot to think, he could actually touch the other boy without making him falter.

A week... two. Meetings in dark corridors and forgotten classrooms. Never twice in the same place. Snape wouldn't step back from the thing he had asked of Sirius and neither could Sirius himself. A promise was a promise, a statement written in stone by pure-blood standards.

Each encounter left Sirius bone tired, often to the point that he fell asleep right on the spot, waking up in the strangest places, each time covered with a conjured blanket, slowly losing its solidity as if it had been there for quite a while. Sometimes Snape was still there even, his hand still resting on the place where he liked it most, covering jaw and neck and cheek in near-loving tenderness.

Each time at first he shivered and balked, even sobbed and cried. "I can't, I can't..." He had begged more often than he dared remember, weak and boyish, with the voice of a child, not a man.

And each time, Snape had reassured him: "You can. Just let it happen. You can." Not once had he been loud or violent, not once impatient. It was such impossible thing, and yet it paled against the knowledge he would have liked to hide from himself, but couldn't. He longed for the next encounter, each time a little more.

It was liberating to stumble, to fall. To be so deep in humiliation, it didn't matter anymore if he cried like a child or wavered like reed. And beyond that, Snape's touch was... indescribable. Not soft or gentle, too rough and calloused for that. But firm and warm and... safe.

He didn't trust Snape any outside of the moments of his weakness, would have hexed him without second thought and expected no less in return, but the moment he handed over his wand, disarmed himself and submitted to the other boy's doubtful mercy, things changed. It was as if they ceased to be the persons they were, raw pain and fear erasing all boundaries.

There was nothing, he hadn't expected Snape to do, to force on him that could make him fear more, deeper than a simple, gentle touch. There was nothing, he would do to reject him, to resist. An unspoken pact of silence and destruction. Relief and torture coiled into each other in ways that defied understanding. Until they would be there, until Snape declared forgiveness, and what then, Sirius couldn't say.

Chapter 3

Adults often claimed, hatred was just as much a attracting emotion as love, hater and hated dancing around each other in a downward spiral, more so, when the positions were interchangeable. Severus had never believed it, and he hated more than enough in his life, hated his drunken father, who beat him, his weak mother, unwilling to defend him or herself. He had hated Petunia, Lily's sister who in turn hated them both back in her jealousy of what she couldn't have.

He had hated himself for pushing Lily away, and he had hated – and still did – the Marauders, all four of them at varying degrees. He hated Potter the most probably, the sheltered, privileged son and everybody's darling.

But the hottest, most destructive feelings in the throes of the moment had always been reserved for Sirius Black, who didn't have anyone and clearly didn't care. Who put all his energy into pushing everyone away, killing even the appearance of care. The boy who would kill for those few who survived such hazing and stayed close. Who never tempered his wants nor emotions, never stepped back from a challenge. Even if that challenge was self-destruction.

Seeing him for what he really was, Severus suddenly understood. And with understanding came unbidden longing, beyond that what they agreed upon. More than even Black's self loathing could allow.

With knowing came attraction, came the wish to possess, to own. It was impossible of course, and

Severus accepted that. He just wasn't sure, he could assist the other boy in his quest for punishment any longer. Black claimed he was paying back, and part of Severus did believe so, wanted it. But the twisted pleasure of self-torture, of facing his undoing to the point of breakdown, that wasn't for Severus' benefit, no matter, how much he enjoyed it. Especially when he did it for all the wrong reasons now.

It wasn't no longer the grim determination to hurt like he had been hurt. Had it been that, he would have stopped, for Black was a far too willing accomplice. It was, what came after, the moments of cathartic freedom, where past and future didn't matter, where their true selves lay bare. The moments, when Black's forehead rested against his collarbone as he slept of his exhaustion. His warmth permeating Severus' hands, still resting on his body, his shivers slowly ceasing, tension slowly releasing below the blanket, he always, always needed, cold as he was then. That was, when hatred turned into something else, neither of them dared name, either of them would deny with conviction. He didn't love the other boy. And he wasn't loved back. Not even for a second.

Alas, he couldn't see the progress Black made with untainted satisfaction. Yes, it brought him closer, allowed him more freedom of movement without sending the other into stupor, but at the same time it meant a step closer to the end. It meant, one day Black would be able to accept more than just the tips of his fingers dipping under his collar, more than a button or two opened, before he had to break it of. And to be honest: Black probably knew, what came next, had demonstrated it uncountable times on all too willing objects of attraction. Severus... hadn't. His position as half-blood in Slytherin House, awkwardness in social situations and less than advantageous looks didn't quite carry the same appeal as the easy charm and roguish handsomeness of Sirius Black. He hadn't tried and hadn't succeeded until now. And since it wasn't something you could read up on, Black would be able to tell.

Severus wasn't fond of humiliation quite the same way as Sirius Black...

Sirius had cried this day. That hadn't happened for a at least a week now, but today it was called for, if not for the reasons, Snape might have assumed. He was getting by far too comfortable with him to be send reeling into complete panic by the baby steps Snape attempted. Opening all of his shirt or even taking it off were well on the table by now. Sure, he would flinch, shake, cry out even, maybe more, if Snape came close to the spine or the nipples, but he wouldn't fall apart like this anymore. Snape was... surprisingly familiar territory. But the longer he fought down his fears, let Snape touch him, the less strength remained to keep up appearances.

That was a problem at the best of times. The can of worms he hid below that aloof pure-blood mask, quite sloppily at times, he had to admit, was not pleasant at all. Magic so dark it made the sun pale, family secrets both unsavory and altogether terrible, outdated or plainly mad beliefs, unreasonably high standards and expectations, all of it garnered with the occasional incest or

murder, all wrapped up inside his head.

This baseline already made for a volatile mixture. This morning added a letter to the mix that soberly informed him both of his cousin's marriage with Lucius Malfoy – a death eater as involved as they came – and their intention to initiate him as soon as “the Dark Lord” would let them. Christmas perhaps. The summer at latest.

At this point Sirius knew, his life as he knew it was at an end. His family wouldn't take no for an answer. Not without threatening violence and disowning or whatever worse they could come up with. Yet, he could not serve Voldemort, not with his full heart, not even just in appearance. The thought of marring his skin with the dreadful Dark Mark made him retch, the deeds necessary to receive it recoil. Sirius had done terrible things already, but even including his current misdeed nothing like that.

And so he was crying. Crying for his lost childhood, the little time he had left. It probably wasn't worth it either way. He had ruined his chances for a good outcome before that, but it still felt like a turning point. This would be his last year of freedom, maybe of his life. In a way he was grateful for Snape now, Snape who gave him reasons to let go and cry, reasons that had nothing to do with that. He wouldn't have had the same luxury with James and Remus.

He couldn't have cried around them, as they wouldn't have let go of it. They would have asked and prodded, until he had no way out anymore, and then they would have gotten themselves into trouble in an attempt to help him, where no help was possible.

Snape would do neither. Snape wouldn't even tell Regulus, or he would have already. And Sirius was very sure, his younger brother wouldn't have missed the opportunity to have a laugh at his expense. He still noticed, something was amiss. “You are strange today. What is it?”

Sirius tried to collect what little senses he had left to make him back off. “None of your concern.” He didn't need to speak aloud, Snape was used to his whispers by now, knew he often lacked the strength for normal speech.

“It is of my concern, when it affects our agreement” he countered slightly miffed, but still allowed Sirius to close his eyes and relax, pulling him closer in a way that by now as to familiar to cause no more reaction than the vague warmth of comfort.

Sirius shrugged. “Family matters. It may add an expiration date to our agreement. If so, I'll let you know.” It wasn't even worth reopening his eyes, now that he had reached the point of resignation. He was so close to sleep, his breath evening out, his limbs growing heavy, he didn't want to talk

anymore.

Snape's fingers curled in his hair and the nails scraped over his scalp, putting yet another protective sheet over the terrible truths of his life. He was thankful for the respite, though not for the continued communication. "Do you expect to kill me or die?"

Sirius huffed at the audacity to imply those were the only options, why he would call of the agreement early, although it was probably true, but didn't answer anymore. It was far too nice to burden himself with something so complicated as thinking. He did that a lot now he realized. With no friends to handle, no pranks to plan, nothing beyond school to occupy him, this had become the best, maybe the only way to pass the terrible vastness of time.

The thought alone hurt so badly it made tears anew burn in his eyes and he quickly pushed it away. But surely Snape noticed he grew tense, as he sat up all of a sudden, remaining motionless then. It felt odd so finally he reopened his eyes, registering Snape wasn't looking at *him*, but beyond, behind him.

In confusion Sirius turned. And despite his surprise didn't even gasp, when he saw. "James." He let it sound carefully neutral, neither angry nor happy, neither accusative nor guilty.

The simple sound jerked movement into the boy he had seen as his brother – still did, even after the silence now breached two months... or more? In four, five steps he was at Sirius' side, grabbing his shoulder to drag him up, clearly expecting him to be naked below the blanket. "What are you doing here? And with *him* of all people!"

Sirius rose on his own, fully clothed, the few open buttons aside, yet still terribly cold. "What does it look like?" He put all the arrogance he could muster in it, as if it was the most normal thing in the world, although it was visible beyond doubt, the very assumption he flaunted couldn't be further from the truth.

Some of the girls he had been with would have caught the hint and draped themselves nicely to give Sirius the provocation, the argument, the fight, he clearly wanted. But Snape wasn't like that. Their... situation wasn't like that either. He stood up, folded the blanket unnecessarily, it would vanish soon enough after all, and stepped to Sirius' side carefully avoiding contact. "Your wand." He slipped it back into Sirius' palm and then tried to pass by James' side, before the older boy could remember, what he usually did to him.

James smirked, a cruel glint in his eyes. "Not so fast, Snivellius." He stepped into Snape's path, trying to block it. "If he won't tell me, maybe you will?" It was a test in more than one way. James'

all too clumsy attempt of a mind game. But he wasn't a Slytherin – or a Black, if it came to that. That Sirius had never done it, had been a choice, not an inability, and he was good enough to see it plainly. *Whom will you choose, Sirius? Will you defend the poor little snake or stand by your brother? And see, he will betray you anyways...*

Sirius didn't like to be played with. Cold anger, an air of superiority and more control that he had had for years surrounded him like a mantle. "I hardly believe that even you could be so hypocritical as to demand an explanation from me after not speaking to me at all in two months. Not when I asked, what to do, not when I *begged* for forgiveness. But now you do..." He scoffed, well aware of the color rising in James' cheeks that had nothing to do with embarrassment. "If that's what it took, I should have... I don't know... snogged Minnie on the second day. Or Evans, preferably."

James whipped out his wand, while Snape, completely forgotten, slipped away. Sirius let them both. "How dare you?" James shouted right into his face, but he didn't even move a muscle.

For all what he looked like he could have been a statue, cold and arrogant and invincible. The illusion held just long enough for James to cast a hex at him. He fell and his knees hit the stone floor with a satisfying crunch, as the knee-cap splintered, exquisite pain blooming and driving tears into his eyes. He broke his fall with his hands, before the same could happen to his face, but it was a close call.

James was still standing at the same place, far too angry to think straight, probably pondering if he should add another kick or insult or hex. He would feel insanely guilty about it later, and funny enough Sirius felt guilty for letting that happen to him. "You know what?" he screamed down at him now. "I don't need your shit. You want to get cozy with the snakes? See if they will help you!" With that he stomped off, leaving Sirius with quite the problem.

He wasn't supposed to be here. No one knew he was here. And walking was just now a bit inconvenient. With a hiss he turned around, sat on the cold stone floor and pulled himself to the next wall, so he could at least lean against it. "Great! Sodding, bloody, *fucking* great!"

But Sirius wasn't one to give up. He cast a spell stabilizing his leg, then, ignoring the pain as good as he could, pulled himself up to hobble back to somewhere more lively, where he could find someone to help him to the Infirmary. Or if he was unlucky and curfew had already passed a teacher who would hand out a detention in exchange for that little trip.

Chapter 4

Severus prided himself to be a good observer. It was a necessary feat, when the smallest things made all the difference between a serious beating and getting away just in time, between a successful potion and a mess. Therefore he didn't need to really look over to the lions' table to know, Sirius Black was absent. It took little more effort to see, Potter seemed unworried, while his comrades pestered him about something he didn't quite want to tell, both of them clearly more agitated.

The conclusion was obvious. Something had happened between them, after Severus left. And whatever it was, Potter didn't want even his fellow lions to know. In turn it meant, Severus needed to find out everything about it. As leverage it was probably pure gold. He winced at the stab of guilt that followed the thought almost immediately. There was no need to blackmail Black anymore and for now he couldn't care less about Potter.

He still wanted to know and wasn't disappointed as soon rumors spread, and before lunch he knew for sure, Black wasn't in class but in the Infirmary at least for the current day, maybe the next one too. People claimed, he had stumbled down stairs after receiving a hex from a Slytherin, some even threw names or claimed to have seen something. Hell, some of the damn lions even caused trouble "in retaliation".

Severus wasn't fooled that easily and slipped into the Infirmary, when everyone else was still eating, even the mediwitch who looked over the place. He found Black easily: he was the only patient, lying on a bed, too still for his usual demeanor, the tension of pain pouring of his body.

When he heard the footsteps he opened his eyes propping himself on his elbows. "Snape." It lacked the sneer, the hatred, the heat. No longer an insult, just a name. "Why are you here?"

"Call it curiosity" Severus answered, pulling himself a chair just close enough for comfortable talk. "We didn't agree to a... another meeting. Surely you want to call this off, now that..."

"No." Black's face consisted of hard lines, etched into marble, making him even more distinct, more aristocratic, more tempting. "No. Yesterday has nothing to do with... this." He nodded in confirmation. "I gave you my word."

Severus studied him in silence, the moment stretching surprisingly comfortable. "You got hurt."

Black ignored the implicit question with a shrug. "Obviously."

"You had a fight then. And lost?" Severus looked apologetically, much to his own chagrin.

"I won. I made a point" Black claimed heatedly, his temper flaring up in the eyes, his mouth pulling into a bitter grin. Something was terribly amiss, the cracks in his usually immaculate persona even more visible than the night before. He looked closer to tears than to laughter.

Very carefully Severus lowered his hand to the other boy's, feeling the jerk that went through him, when their skin touched. He placed one finger, so he could feel his pulse flutter, much too fast, like a scared songbird in the hunter's hand. "Then that is not the reason, why you are so... wound up?"

Black halted, his whole movement frozen, then looked away. "I told you, it is nothing." As if the way he behaved didn't tell Severus, it was everything, really. "I wouldn't tell you anyways... I don't trust you."

Severus huffed a small laugh. "Honestly? I have seen you at your worst. I really don't need any more leverage."

Still Black's pulse raced below his fingertip, as the older boy sat up abruptly, hissing in pain from the jerk to his suspended leg. "Don't lie, Snape. There is no such thing as too much leverage for a Slytherin." His voice sang with accusation, but the face, the eyes didn't play into it, looked too gentle, questioning.

It struck Severus as odd, even more so than the rest he now knew about Black. The boy knew an awful lot about Slytherins for a Gryffindor, especially one who had gone out of his way to distance himself from them as much as humanly possible. "How did you even end up in Gryffindor with that

attitude?" he teased to cover up his confusion, and was startled by the resulting wince.

Black was good though, caught himself, before Severus could be sure. "I am nothing like you. Like them. No matter how hard they try to pull me back. I can't, I can't."

"Is that it?" It wasn't really a question anymore. More like establishing a fact. "Just... tell them no." If Severus assumption was anything close to the truth, it was what he, what most of his peers even would die for, or rather kill for, they had some self-preservation after all. But he could see, why it wouldn't appeal to Black. Not with his history.

"Clearly you don't know my family." Black but his lip and smiled rueful. "I'd be lucky to be only disowned and ruined for all times. My life is over, either way." The smile grew sad. "It's the choice between ending my life or others. I know the right decision. I do. I just..." He pulled his hand free covering his face. "I don't want it to be over yet, you know?"

Severus was close to saying, it couldn't possibly be that bad to give in, but he heard things too. And Black's information was probably more accurate. It didn't faze him all that much. The world owed him and no one, especially not muggles deserved his pity, but he saw, how Black was different. He didn't want to see that. Wanted to see the bully, the bastard, the reckless child, who didn't give a damn, but that wasn't possible anymore. Black hated the Slytherins as extension of what he hated in himself. While Potter avoided punishment, Black embraced it.

Before he could make up his mind though, some noise rose. "You better get going" Black suggested. "Wouldn't want to be caught with a Gryff, would you?" The boy had a way to enrage Severus, even when he meant well.

It was evening, when the skele-gro had finally done what it was supposed to, allowing Sirius to limp back to his dorms in the Gryffindor tower. He really was in no mood to face James and the rest of the pack in his dorm, but neither did he ever back off from a challenge. If so, he had faltered long ago, bowed to his family's wishes, been the good son. The Marauders were nothing compared to that. Nothing.

He still didn't just bang in, more slipped, finding his way to his bed, before any of the others noticed. Only when a spring creaked, as he laid back to stare at the ceiling, Remus, who was sitting at his desk, startled. Peter and James were still out, Quidditch practice probably. Peter wasn't good enough for the team, but made a decent training partner. It seemed that kind of evening.

For a while nothing happened, although he could *feel* Moony's eyes on him. Still not in the mood to talk then. Sirius tried not to care about the hurt, it still caused, each time he was made aware again. He had messed up, he sure had. But they wouldn't even let him apologize, and he ached.

Just, when the tension became unbearable and he was about to face what he could only assume was Remus' stare, the door flew open, and two loud boys trudged in. Peter as usual flopped down on his bed, not looking left or right, cooling down a bit, before he would head for the showers. James stopped dead. "Oh look who is back. Didn't figure you would dare."

Sirius sat up. "It's my dorm too." He tried to gauge if James was still angry, or just agitated, but for once couldn't tell.

"What the hell was that with Snape?" the other boy shouted, stepping closer with two, three threatening stomps. It was hard to tell if he was furious or concerned. "And why did *he* have your wand?"

Sirius knew of the wonderful feats of half-truths. "We were talking. He... didn't want to get hexed. It was a measure of building... basic trust." There were so many open threads, James didn't even know, which to pick first. Sirius didn't mind. He would forget about the rest, if they got through a few of them, if only Sirius kept a straight face until the story started to make some sense.

"And you? What kept you from being hexed?" Peter, god bless him, interrupted.

"Courage. I'm not a scared little snake. Besides... I don't need a wand to handle him." It was exactly, what they were expecting of him, it would work.

"You were lying side by side, below a fucking blanket! On a fucking desk" James stated, full of irritation.

"And? It's damn cold down there, in the dungeons... It was convenient." He shrugged, looking as if nothing out of the ordinary could be found in that. And Merlin give that James hadn't seen his head resting against Snape's shoulder nor Snape's hand steadying him. He was so screwed even without that, when the mere thought brought back the feeling of safety, the shivers on his skin from the firm but peaceful touch.

James scoffed and folded his arms. "Why would you even want to talk to him? What would the

damn snake have to tell you?"

'More than you, for now' Sirius thought, but didn't voice. He was lonesome, but goading friends only went so far. For all their faults and all his despair: he deserved, what they did to him. "I tried to make peace. For Remus. Better, if Snape isn't out for revenge."

"Don't you dare use Moony as excuse!" Peter chimed in, but shut up immediately, when the very one shushed him.

"Leave me for a second?" he asked gently, the usual calm tone coming to full effect.

Peter shuffled out, muted by it and even James only grumbled: "Five minutes."

Sirius stayed in place as if he was glued to it, when Moony sat down at the other end of his bed. "Don't take this as anything like approval. Or forgiveness. I am still mad at you. Very. But I am worried too. What has he done to you?" This, this alone was, why Moony was their heart and soul, their good spirit and conscience.

"Nothing. He did nothing to me. I hurt myself accidentally, when I argued with James, is all." Another half truth, but he was abashed about this one. Remus deserved more than that. "We really just tried to make a truce." It was closer, though still not the real deal. "It's been... going on for a while, and look, I am fine." Better then fine, really.

Moony didn't look convinced. "Pads, something is off, I can tell. Talk to us, to James, to... McGonagal. Anyone."

"To you?" Remus looked down, and the rejection was clear. "I see. James won't talk to me either. And... Minnie..." Sirius shook his head. "I talked to Snape and it was... good. Better than I thought." 'I have no one' he didn't say, didn't try to blackmail Moony back into this. It wouldn't matter after Christmas. The summer at latest. "For what it's worth. I am terribly sorry. And... whenever you are ready." Damn inconvenient this new habit of shedding tears, whenever things got difficult. And it shocked the hell out of Remus. Sirius just wiped them away and stood up. "When you are ready." Then he ran, giving a flying whiff on the healer advice to take it slow. He just needed to get away, out... anywhere, where he could breathe.

Chapter 5

He was on his way to the Great Hall, when Black dashed past him not even seeing him, obviously headed to miss the third meal that day. On a whim Severus followed him, which wasn't hard, given the fact the other boy made enough noise for an erumpent. He was just about to silently slip outside, when some movement caught his attention and he was pulled aside and into a shadowy corner.

"What are you doing with my brother?" Regulus Black asked, his tone carefully not giving away anything that might be used for his saving graces. "I've seen you sneak after him for quite a while now."

Severus wasn't some green first year though. He knew his way around Slytherin House. "I would assume that is none of your concern judging by the way you pointedly sneer at each other when you ever get beyond aggressive ignorance."

"It's true, on principle" Regulus claimed, not quite as convincingly as he wanted. "Yet, he is family. Some things are expected."

Severus sighed and turned away, unwilling to comply to the questioning, but the younger Black brother jerked him back by his arm. "Listen. If you do anything stupid, I'll obliterate you." The polite, almost friendly tone left no doubts whatsoever he meant what he said. No one could serve a threat like a Slytherin.

"I have no idea what even counts as stupid in this case... Your brother has ruined his reputation quite thoroughly" Severus mocked, unwilling to cower.

On that Regulus facade crumbled, revealing at least a modicum of real concern. "It's not his reputation I worry about." He left it at that, but the message was clear. 'Break his heart and I break your bones. All of them, one by one, so you can appreciate each one.' Unfortunately Severus knew there was no way, this wouldn't happen. Unless Black's prediction came true and he didn't survive

until then. Bloody sentimental Gryffindors. Though, if he was honest to himself, his heart was broken already, and broke again, every time, the other cried, or when his face closed off, hiding a pain he didn't dare share.

He hated that it had come to that, he hated himself for finding even the least sympathy for the other boy, but it was what it was. Sirius Black wasn't the school's uncontested champion of heartbreak for nothing. And it said something when boys like Potter or Lupin placed in the range of also-ran.

"I am not your brother's keeper" Severus whispered almost insulted. "Last time I checked he hated me."

Regulus looked doubtful. "I'd be more happy, if he didn't give a damn."

Severus was about to the challenge, when Regulus made up his mind and backed him against the wall. "I don't know, what you expect from him. But no matter what you won't get anything. Blacks don't ride into the sunset with half-bloods. Blacks don't give a shit about the small things. He will marry who the family tells him to and he will stop his escapades. There is not even *room* for people like you. Thoughts like you." He stepped back. "Do the smart thing. Bury your hopes, while you can. My parents are less lenient than I."

Sirius sat by the lake, studying the almost full moon with dread. It would be the third when he wasn't there, when Prongs and Wormtail would have to deal with Moony alone. And each time he wasn't, something could go wrong. He felt insanely guilty about that, guilty and reassured he deserved all that was coming. He could have been better. Should have been better. But he wasn't. No matter, how much he tried, he could never shed what was put into his cradle.

Maybe it was best to stay out here, for as long as it took, forever and ever and ever.

Someone neared, the footsteps slow and insecure, and for a moment Sirius pondered shifting and heading for the forbidden forest to avoid the confrontation. In the end it wasn't really worth it. He could tell off whoever disturbed him here. Or go, when they were to distracting. He wasn't prepared for Snape sitting down just next to him, putting a dish with some sandwiches between them. "Doesn't help against your family to starve yourself."

Perplexed Sirius looked up and shook his head. "I don't starve." He paused, looking down at the

food and realizing, he was certainly hungry. "It's just... the Great Hall, Gryffindor tower... All Lion territory feels wrong. As I don't belong there anymore. Easier to stay out of their way." It sounded cowardly, but that wasn't it. He wasn't afraid. He tried to be... considerate.

Snape just shrugged, giving it not much thought. "Eat that then." And Sirius did. If Snape wanted to poison him, he was all in for it. It was within the possibilities, with how the other boy watched him in silence.

"Ask me" Sirius finally managed. "Ask me, if I regret it." Apparently he was in the right mood for torture. No sense of self-preservation whatsoever. Figured that he had ended in Gryffindor.

Snape only snorted, then added less than convincingly: "Do you?"

Sirius nodded. "Yeah. But not for the reasons you would think. Dumbledore anyways." He scoffed, then imitated the terribly sermon-like way, the old man spoke: "You don't want to be a murderer, Sirius, don't you?" Another scoff rounded the citation. "I will end up a murderer anyways. Not you... probably. We get along disturbingly well..." Sirius looked at Snape almost apologetically. Maybe he regretted that part too.

"Why do you think, you'd be a murderer?" Snape asked in confusion. It was excused, he wasn't a Black, he didn't know, what dark pure-blood education looked like.

"It comes with the name." Sirius bit off a bit of sandwich with a growl. "You think, dear mom and dad would still walk free, if they weren't filthy rich and everyone afraid of them?" He reached for an olive and hurled it towards the undisturbed black water of the lake. It disappeared with a plop. "I don't stand a chance on my own. Murderer or victim, a whole range of options." Moony always hated when he did this and even James was helpless to that kind of sarcasm. Snape just nodded along.

"I would have had a chance with James" Sirius admitted. "I wasn't friends with him because of that, but... it would have been... convenient."

Snape looked confused. "What of the git?"

"The Potters are influential. And fearless. They stood up against the Black pure-blood agenda. And survived." Sirius was pretty sure, it would have sounded condescending if he had explained it to someone else. Now it felt natural.

"Then go speak to him." He hadn't expected exasperation from the smaller boy. Nor that suggestion.

"I can't. I won't. He'd think, I'd only... tell him, to get back in his good books. He won't speak to me? I won't speak to him." Sirius avoided to fold his arms, it was childish enough without and Snape knew it.

"Are all Blacks so stubborn?"

"You tell me..." Sirius countered. "You know my brother." He was grateful for the change of topic. Arguing about Regulus could fill hours and probably bore Snape to death. Or at least to the point where he left him alone.

"Speaking off..."

It was a small treat to watch Sirius Black *eat*. Severus hadn't thought anything of it, when he brought sandwiches, hadn't expected it to be... this. He had seen him eat a thousand times in the Great Hall, hadn't he?

But this was different. Out alone in the dark the older boy had no need to pretend, to swagger or brag. No need to misbehave to make people forget, what a well-trained little pure-blood he was. Out here, he ate with delicate care and all the elegance Severus envied in his pure-blood peers. Effortlessly he made something as mundane as eating into a show of superiority that should enrage all those low-lives around him, but made them instead feel inadequate and plebeian.

Severus wanted to kiss the fingertips, that were licked clean with such simple ease, the tongue not even showing, just barely perceptible. Daring to think of those lips was already too much. And that, at last brought all the rage and fury he needed to get through it. Only to stand in his way when Black started to talk without a preface.

His vulnerability was even worse than his eating habits. Severus would have killed just to have it again and again, to sit by the other boys side and see him talk, bare throat and soul without even the appearance of fear. Worst of all though, Severus understood. Too much of it. All. The sentiments, the guilt, the reluctance to be a burden to even his closest friends. He hated, how so

many things were so terribly relatable and jumped onto the first topic to detach from that. Only to realize, this wasn't any better.

“Speaking off... I met your brother. Or rather... he met me.”

Black's grin was manic and fully unhappy. “Can't have it when things don't go his way, can he?” He let himself fall the ground, lounging like it wasn't on grassy, leave-covered ground but on expensive furniture.

“He cares for you” Severus tried, but was immediately interrupted.

“Hah, bloody hah! I just don't know, what he annoys him more: that I don't comply to the rules our dear family set, or that it may fall to him to bear the burden, because I'll get disowned.” Black rolled on his back and looked up to the clouded, starless sky, falling into a long silence that coaxed Severus closer and closer, until he could no longer resist to reach out and *touch*.

Contrary to his experience Black didn't flinch. Instead he threw a deeply sad look and nuzzled the hand on his cheek. “I am ready. We can end this tonight.” It was so quiet and yet every sound so well-rounded, perfect.

“I don't want this to end” it burst out of Severus before he could stop himself.

Black wasn't surprised, only resigned. “It has to end though...” His hand caught Severus' fingers and placed a tiny kiss on each tip.

“You are ashamed of me” Severus concluded with lingering accusation, but Black shook his head in terrible sincerity.

“You should be ashamed of me.” His mouth twitched, as he tilted his head, his eyes staying on Severus with a longing, he never felt directed at him before.

What could he say to that? Nothing really, so he decided to change tactics. “At least tell me, this is real, this isn't just... another conquest for you.”

The other boy's eyes gleamed softly. "You call yourself a Slytherin? No self-preservation whatsoever, have you? Wouldn't it be better, easier, if you could tell yourself, that's all it was? A prank? A way to humiliate you? So you can go back to hating me, when I am gone?" Each word stabbed him like a knife, burned him like hot iron, telling him again and again, in all the wrong words what it was in fact. That Black was as affected as he was. Maybe more.

He startled, when the older boy rose suddenly, closing the distance between them, hovering close, so close. His eyes flicked between Severus' eyes and lips, the daring Gryffindor suddenly too shy to go ahead. "It cant be. Severus. Be reasonable."

Merlin, he had never called him that before not even when he shivered and cried. Never his name. And after that he wanted to scream in his face: "I don't care!" He didn't, after all, he still *was* a Slytherin, but Black saw it anyways.

"It's... no good." He frowned. "I have a cousin. Andromeda. They have hunted her for years. Still do. And if they get hold of the man who... made her stray from the path..." He shook his head. "If I killed *him* I wouldn't even call it murder. Only mercy."

"But your dear friends..." Severus interrupted, scared by his own boldness.

"Are safe options. I told you, the Potter name goes a long way." Black sighed in resignation. "I will say it once. And never again. And if you ever ask, I will deny it ever happened. Understood?" His voice was as beautiful and broken as shattered china. When Severus nodded, he leaned in, brushing against his ear. "I love you." Then, as if it hadn't even happened, he distanced himself, fully stood up. "I have to go. And so should you. It's almost curfew."

"Where are you going?" Severus asked, as it wasn't the castle's direction, Black took. The other boy only shook his head and went, leaving an empty silence.

Chapter 6

The moment Sirius was out of sight he started to run. When he couldn't see anymore through his tears he turned. Dogs didn't try and he found his emotion muted whenever he ran on Pads. He hadn't wanted this to happen, had only started, because it seemed impossible. He should have known, everything he touched turned into ashes sooner or later, he had been there before. Just recently.

But in Merlin's name, this was *Snape*! Nasty little Slytherin Snivellius, despised for all he was and wasn't. He had seemed safe, felt safe. Too safe. Safe wasn't good, wasn't meant to be.

After a while, the run on four paws calming him, Sirius looked up once more. It was so close to the full moon, the disc visible, even through the veil of clouds. He shouldn't be running all night. He would be needed the next evening. Or was it the one after? Only he wouldn't. He had screwed that up too.

Slowly he sat on his hind legs, throwing his head back and howled, a long, lonely sound that would find no answer. Not tonight. Not ever again, maybe. He lay down and relaxed. A dog could sleep everywhere. And the others wouldn't get him into trouble by telling, he wasn't in the dorm. Even when they were angry at him, they weren't snitches.

Suddenly something heavy broke through the undergrowth, something big enough to be concerning. A centaur? Thestral? Unicorn? No... a fully grown majestic stag, halting the flow of its motion, when it noticed Pads.

He gave a tentative whine, ready to bolt, ready to fight, but the beast just watched him curiously and stalked closer cautiously.

Pads didn't move, stayed in his place, until the wet nose hit his head, a heavy head shoved him half playfully to the ground. When the stag ran then, he followed, all the way back to the castle, where beasts turned human again, all the way to the dorms, where James finally turned, just before opening the door. "Don't you dare go alone again. It's dangerous out there."

Sirius was about to say something nasty, when he felt the sudden pressure of James' embrace. "We were worried."

"Am..." He couldn't say it on first try. "Am I forgiven?"

James didn't let go. "Who knows. Trust isn't... easily restored. But you are welcomed back." It was enough, had to be enough.

Sirius nodded, sudden exhaustion pulling at him. "In that case... can we talk in the morning?"

He had to look dreadful, for James just nodded and ushered him in, more or less manhandling him into bed. At this point, barely able to function enough to put on pajamas and pull the blanket, he felt to miserable to sleep. And yet, the next minute he was gone.

It was the first time, someone ever said it to him. Just this once. And he hadn't said it back. He couldn't believe it, couldn't believe either, it hadn't even happened. And how. And who. His thoughts were a mess, even more so, when he remembered Regulus' tirade.

'Blacks don't do that kind of thing.' And he now knew exactly why. And it hurt. Not the way it should. He didn't mourn what he could never have, didn't think, it had been possible in the first place. But... Black had tried to warn him and instead handed him the key to understanding... everything.

His hatred, his sadness, his despair. His manic joy, childlike playfulness. Sirius Black was terrible at coping, or he would have made a wonderful Slytherin, a leader of his own, the son, the Blacks could be, would be proud of.

If Regulus knew it too? Held the same secret love and pity for him, as Severus did, one, he didn't dare express because it wouldn't be welcome? Would not be taken as a gift but as an insult? He wanted to talk to him, wanted to ask him about it, but couldn't. Regulus had made his attitude abundantly clear. And the other Slytherins... even if Severus had been able to come up with one he could trust enough, none of them would even believe it. No one would. Except for Lily, maybe. She had always seen the good in people. Even in Severus. But he had called her something unforgivable and thrown their friendship into her face.

He still wanted to talk to her so badly.

Being back in the dorm, if not in good graces (in any graces seemed excessive enough right now) made Sirius hypersensitive, waking him, when Peter who needed a long, long time in the morning more or less fell out of bed to have his usual sequence of cold and hot drenches in the shower until he felt able to behave human.

One started to know people after sharing the dorm with them for years. Sirius knew like a clockwork Remus would be next, stand up, get to his desk, still in pajamas and check over his nightly work, before heading for the bathroom that by then would be a foggy hell. James would be last to wake up, but come over and try to pretend he wasn't, just because Sirius was still down, resulting in a play-fight that sprawled both them and the blankets and pillows on the floor.

Only that wasn't going to happen anymore. Not today, maybe not ever. The innocence, the trust was lost. With a sigh Sirius got up, before even Remus could rise and started, against all his instincts to do homework. It was a terribly boring job, but it kept him occupied, kept him from thinking. He had reached the task of naming ten uses of itchroot for potions, which was a pain in the backside, because he knew at least twenty, none of them in the curriculum or fit for use in an essay, when the headlights overpowered the small one at his desk and movement behind him demanded his attention. "Pads?"

Sirius turned. He didn't want that conversation. He really, really didn't want that conversation. But he wouldn't be able to get out of it. James sat on his bed, watching him, further away, acting preoccupied, Remus like a line-guard. "I'll let you know that it was... absolutely irresponsible, what you did. And that you are out on the ice, if you ever, ever, ever do anything even half that bad again." James wasn't good at sounding grave, usually, but this time he could almost outbid his own father. "That said, we... didn't react very mature either." He wrung his hands now, though his gaze didn't waver. "We shouldn't have shunned you like that. Isolated. It was wrong. And..." He looked back toward Remus who urged him on in silence, still clearly unwilling to talk to Sirius himself. "And if there is something you want to talk about it, I am here. You know? I am still... I mean we are still..."

Sirius, who had listened very carefully, half raised from his seat, sank back exhaling slowly, unwilling to show his hand right now. He was too much in a pinch to be able to afford appearing desperate. "Thanks. I'll... let you know."

It clearly wasn't what James wanted or expected and he was almost at Sirius side, before one or

Moony's coughs broke through the determined single-mindedness. He still couldn't help but stress again: "I'd really, I mean, really listen."

Sirius looked out of his window towards the lake, then back at James. "You want to know about Snape. Thing is... there is nothing to know. I already told you all. You just wouldn't believe it. We talked. It was cold. He conjured a blanket. We made a truce. Is all." He thought about it a moment. "Maybe it would be nice not to hex him anymore, unless he does it first." Sirius shrugged apologetically.

It was so outrageous, even Moony stared, until Peter, still half asleep stumbled back into the room. "Morning..." He scratched his head and wiped his eyes, but unable to figure out the situation then simply went to his bed to change clothing from the simple towel to school robes. It broke the spell and prompted a wave of activity, as everyone tried to catch up with the lost time.

It didn't happen. It never happened. Severus had dreamed it all. Dreamed the shivers and crying and fear, dreamed the desperate need in Black's eyes, the apologies, the three words, he told him, he would never repeat. Dreamed it all. He had to.

Because Black was back with Potter, the world returned to its hinges. Sure, he hadn't been hexed in a week. And the wild laughter so often present, where the Gryffindor stayed remained curiously absent. And there were those lingering looks over to the Slytherin table. Distrustful, almost accusing on Potter's part, sad and silent on Black's. And sure, in prefect meetings Lupin was obviously torn between curiosity and keeping his distance.

But all of that meant nothing, was nothing. Part of the delusion he had created for himself to deal with the scare, the fear for his life, the nightmares. That must be it, for no other explanation did not sound insane. And Christmas was close, where the world would sink into a cloud of cloying sweetness overwhelming enough enforce retching. Where the castle would fall silent as every student with a loving home would disappear and leave him to his own thoughts at last.

Potter would go home too. And Black. 'My life will be over' and 'the choice between my life and that of others'. It suddenly rang in his head with a pang of guilt. Not every home that welcomed its children over Christmas was *loving*. And not every festivity joyful.

He must have dreamed it. Of course. Such nightmare didn't fit the charming devil that was Sirius Black. And if he disappeared over Christmas, it was surely only on his own volition.

Sirius sat in the Hogwarts Express to go home for Christmas, when he finally mustered up the courage to speak with James, who was alarmed immediately, when he heard the tone of Sirius' unprompted first words.

"I might not... be well after Christmas."

He had sat at Remus' side with Peter on the other, still showing Sirius he wasn't back in full, but re-seated in a whim. "Meaning what?"

Sirius didn't know, what to say and remained silent, the eyes of all his friends on him. When he couldn't figure it out, his fingers twitched on his forearm as if to follow the lines of a Morsmordre, already etched into his skin.

"No!" James exclaimed. "You won't let them." He understood more than Sirius would have expected and certainly more than he wanted him to, but it was too late to regret.

"That is why... Everything comes at a cost." The twitching did not cease, tapping a nervous rhythm against his arm under the far too perceptive gaze of his friends.

"When... you take the Floo. To the Potter house. Or to Hogwarts" Peter suggested, his jaw slack, his eyes wide.

James said nothing. He wasn't sure, what it would take to make Sirius flee. If such thing even existed. And Sirius wasn't either. "I see you in January," 'I hope.'

It had been only a few days, since the main part of the student body departed for Christmas, leaving Severus and a few poor souls like him to the eerie silence of the empty halls, a silence, he in fact welcomed. No bullies, no name-calling no absentminded Ravenclaws, overwhelming Hufflepuffs or nosy Slytherins. No one.

No one but one Sirius Black, pale as the death and shivering, walking at from the office of his head of House, McGonagal to the Infirmary. He didn't see Severus, didn't see anything, as he was guided by the teacher, who had to encourage him to move from time to time by a soft shove in between his shoulder blades.

The picture burned Severus nonetheless and he fled, finding himself in the library that at these times was also gratefully silent. He should have been researching for his potion project. Or maybe his homework for Defense. Instead he found himself reaching for a book on healing, skimming over the register for symptoms.

That one didn't have, what he searched and neither did the next. After three books Severus gave up and returned to his books on Defense, only to find himself leaving the pages without paying attention. Sighing he cast a tempus. Time for dinner. Or for skipping dinner and paying visit to the person he was very pointedly trying not to think of. He pretended to think of it, but he really wasn't that hungry.

Sirius was pretty sure, his story didn't fool the medi-witch for even a minute, though he had take precautions as far as he could, but given his history with her he had a decent hope, she wouldn't call him out on it, at least not in front of McGonagal. His head of house was of course suspicious why he went to Hogwarts and not St. Mungos, but she had fallen victim to plausible deniability more often than not, so he was safe on that front as well.

And once she went back to her office he could settle and wait for the night that promised to be very, very unpleasant. At least it would be peaceful. No screaming, no accusations, no further hexing. It would be nice. And maybe he could even keep some of his meal down this time.

After his teacher left, the medi-witch threw him a quizzical look and settled beside his bed. "Again?"

Sirius set his jaw and shrugged. It had never before been this bad, but he didn't want to let her know that. Usually she only found the remnants at the yearly check-up and could be easily persuaded, it was only a fight between brothers (or cousins) that kind of escalated. No such luck this time. He could feel the occasional painful twitching and cramping of his muscles still, and it would persist at least for another day.

"I leave you something to eat and drink. Take some, whenever you feel you can handle it. And try to sleep." Her expression shifted from concerned to accusing. "I really should talk to the headmaster about it."

Sirius sighed. "It's nothing. I'll be fine. Thank you." It wouldn't pay for her to get herself into that particular trouble.

Finally she left, too, and Sirius could stop pretending his body wasn't giving him hell. He allowed his breath to give elaborated shivers and ignored the food completely but took a sip every now and then. Elongated exposure to the cruciatus curse was always terrible. One day he would just go mad. Or so he hoped at least.

To his surprise his eyes fell shut soon after and he fell into an uneasy, restless slumber, only to be woken up what felt like minutes later by fingertips on his cheek. Instantly Sirius jerked awake.

"Shush, it's just me" someone whispered urgently, though it took a moment to identify Snape's voice.

Sirius calmed some, but still felt contrary. "I fell ill, and came here, so I wouldn't get anyone else sick too. Including you, just so you know."

Snape ignored the dismissal in favor of checking his pulse and breath. "You aren't contagious."

"I do have a fever" Sirius disagreed in a futile attempt.

"Your symptoms match none of the common diseases" Snape claimed with a nod. "I checked."

Again, Sirius tried to disagree. "There's always a new one."

Snape, done with assessing his body-functions now petted him, figuring his lack of resistance was a permission. "You don't have to lie to me."

Sirius didn't say a thing but relaxed slowly under the touch.

"I brought you something" Snape suddenly announced and slipped his hand into a hidden pocket. "White Wormflower. Not as good as a real potion, but it should help with the muscular shivers." Sirius watched him caught between surprise and horror. It was the perfect cure to allow at least some sleep. But how did he figure?

Now it was Snapes place to say nothing. He only added some petals to Sirius glass of water and made him drink it then, making him comfortably warm and drowsy, his limbs heavy with sleep. Sirius assumed, there had been more in it than just the petals, but was too tired and content to think much about it. "Thanks" he whispered, drawing the word out, as he lost focus. For as long as he felt it, the other boy didn't move, didn't take away the hand petting him soothingly.

Chapter 7

It paid to know his way around potions. Black hadn't even noticed, he had been thoroughly drugged. Pain relief, muscle relaxant, a mild sleeping potion. All rolled up in a few petals of White Wormflower that would sooth the pains in his body further, help him heal.

Severus wasn't quite sure, why he did it, but it felt too good not to do it, not to watch as the other boy slowly drifted to sleep under his ministrations. Especially when he realized, he had been so right. And that they had more in common than he had ever imagined, more than Black would have him know. It was frivolous of course, dangerous even. He couldn't get attached to one Sirius Black, not even a bit. And this was no longer a question of his annoying bullies or friends. They could only do so much and hadn't done anything at all since... well, since. But if Black's family was willing to do *that* to their own son, he hadn't been exaggerating when he insinuated what they would do to Severus, if he got in their way.

It was easier said than done, though, this not getting attached. Black looked so peaceful and sweet, when he slept, innocent, really. One only noticed the hard lines of pain and constraint due to their absence, although they already started to bury their presence into his skin.

Hell, he didn't want to feel sympathy, didn't want to understand, didn't want to... fall... sit in the dark beside an Infirmary bed and watch someone sleep, who really didn't deserve the sentiment. Grumpily Severus reached for Black's hand and held it in his own, feeling the muscles still taut under the skin. He smoothed over it, bend forward and raised it to his own cheek, imagining how it would feel like to be touched back deliberately. How Black's hands, Black's lips, Black's body would fit against his own. The thumb twitched and then he felt a small caress. Seemed, the sleeping potion part was really very "mild". "S' okay" Black slurred softly, his eyes still closed, his body more relaxed than usual. "I want to." Another twitch of his thumb set Severus' skin on fire, then he was back asleep. It was unfair really. Reluctantly Severus breathed the shadow of a kiss to Black's face and left in near silence, running away, as soon as he could, because his skin itched as if it was too small for his body.

They were fools. Moths of flame, dancing around in circles through the darkness, burning each other's wings. Sirius had tried to end it, let Snape down softly, before he went home for Christmas, knowing whatever there was between them, maddening, stupid, childish thing that it was, would be doomed from the start. Could dispell them too. But now, alone in the near empty castle, there wasn't even tiptoeing anymore, or hiding.

They went to their meals alone. Each sitting at a near empty table far away from each other, far away from anybody else. But they met right after, exploring all the hidden corners, empty hallways, secret passages. Sirius showed of his secrets of more physical nature, hidden rooms and passages, and Snape reciprocated with other, smaller, but no less valuable secrets. The place, where you could watch the faeries dance at night, that forgotten cabinet, where Slughorn stored surplus potion ingredients and never kept track what was actually in there. The location of the Slytherin common room. He didn't let Sirius in, but allowed him to wait just around the corner, when he needed to get something from his dorms.

Allowed. It was a strange word, with regards to Sirius, but the truth was this: Snape was still in charge, still called the shots. And Sirius had to accept what was given or leave it. He couldn't even start to understand why this didn't feel scary but very comforting. Maybe he didn't even trust himself anymore, after everything that happened. No one else did, after all. No one but Snape, apparently, because he didn't stand on guard all the time anymore. Did turn his back on Sirius without jerking back to front the moment he realized. He didn't flinch away from accidental touches either and neither did Sirius. It was... inconceivable. And it was only the start.

It seemed to happen slowly, at first. A touch here, a look there, but before Sirius could even grasp it, things had gotten... normal. Familiar. No longer a punishment or at least a strain. And Snape...

Hell, what was he doing? It was irresponsible and stupid and all, but in the shadow of the dying year, in the darkness of a vacated castle it was too hard a task to resist.

Sitting in an empty classroom, talking about all or nothing seemed the new normal, and Severus couldn't help but like it, counting down the days until the Christmas break ended with dread, because he had what he could want, all that he could want.

He had Sirius Black right there, open, honest to some degree, vulnerable and willing. They could talk for hours about nothing at all, until that strange pensive smile latched to the corner of Black's mouth, creating a dimple of unseen perfection. Or he could crack a joke, sarcastic as it would get, and Black would laugh, almost as he did sometimes with Potter, almost like that.

Severus sometimes imagined, seeing them from the outside, sitting there in the twilight, and wondered, what they looked like. Friends? Lovers? Siblings? Would the imagined beholder enjoy the sight of untainted youth or would he scowl, wondering, what either of them was up to? And who would fall victim to it?

He knew it, of course. Black, especially this new, sincere Black wasn't the least prepared to match a Slytherin. If someone was to get hurt, it was him, if Severus only wanted. And yet, he held back, inched away from the moment, when *he* would tell Black it was over. Didn't want to see the walls tumbling down around the other. Not anymore.

Instead he lured him closer, taming the unsuspecting wild-child, until... Until this one time, Black leaned in, his pulse so distinct, Severus could see it, so wild, he imagined to hear it, and kissed him, right on the lips. It wasn't what Severus thought it would be. Kisses from Black shouldn't have been so tentative, so frightened. He shouldn't have drawn back so fast nor been so scared. But he was. And as Severus reached out, his hand slowly guiding the other boy back into another kiss, he realized Black had never recovered. Never taken the reins back. He was still at Severus' mercy, more so than before in fact, and he was waiting.

Waiting to be taken up on his offers, waiting to be allowed closer, to fall apart, to... Severus couldn't tell, what he wanted, not in full extent and it was the safer option not to pry. But some things, he wanted too, and so kiss after kiss after kiss, he stole the breath right from Black's lips.

The older boy was a better kisser by far, more experienced, talented, knowing. But that meant nothing compared to the one thing: Severus allowed. Severus decided.

He had assumed, Black was just reckless, arrogant, blind. Walking into his trap willingly with open eyes seemed just too unreal. But when Black was reckless, he knew of the risks, when he was arrogant it was, because he was that good. And if he was blind it was by his own choosing. Submitting to Severus willingly, accepting his lead was... it was impossibly flattering. Simply too good.

The morning, three days before the school would again be filled with just too many nosy kids, Snape asked him the most feared question, threading their hands together, so he couldn't flee. "Why do you do this? Or more precisely: why let me do this to you?" His thumbs stroked over Sirius' hands to calm him, as if this would help. "It's not about forgiveness anymore. So.. what is it?"

Sirius took ages to find an answer, hoped Snape would get impatient, and interrupt him. But he didn't say a word, until Sirius finally, managed: "I... Everything I touch, it all burns to ashes. Like a curse." He took a shivering breath and tried not to sound so damn weak, but to no avail. "Even when this has to end, and soon, it cannot end in tragedy. I want to..." He bit down before a sob could escape. "I want to watch you and remember, it was... there and it was real." He tried to free his hands but couldn't with Snape keeping them trapped. "So I don't touch."

"Let me get this straight..." Snape reached out, pulling him into his lap – and he went willingly. "You don't allow people to touch you, because..." He made a vague gesture and Sirius was grateful he didn't spell it out. "And you don't touch those you care for, because of... family issues and concerns..." On Sirius' silent nod, he rested his hands on Sirius' clavicles. "I begin to understand why you feel so terribly alone."

Sirius scoffed for a moment, but then arched up, pleading for a kiss. Snape didn't let him wait for long, their lips and tongues finding a rhythm he hadn't thought possible. "You taste so damn good, always. Something floral, I think." He was used to speaking his mind and he liked the blush that colored Snape's pale skin. "I think, we have both died and this is just paradise." A gloomy paradise, befitting a disgraced Black heir. "It isn't though..." They both remembered all too well, the end of their intimacy was only days ahead.

"I would like you to touch me" Snape finally muttered. "Not like the others. Like you mean it."

Sirius fell silent, not only his voice, his very heart seemed to stop for a second. "I could make it feel good" he whispered. "Unforgettable." He couldn't afford to let Snape *that* close, he wouldn't ever be able to survive.

"I don't want it good. And there is only one thing truly unforgettable. I want you."

Sirius felt his skin rise in goosebumps, his body shaking in a rush of fear, like he hadn't had in weeks. "I can't" he whispered, and then in an endless litany again: "I can't, I can't, I can't." His guts clenched and the insubstantial pain of being became near unbearable. "I can't."

Snape soothed over the jerking, cramping, twitching muscles, murmuring softly, soothingly: "You can, it will be alright. You can." It led nowhere, was beside the point. But he caught up on that too, damn insightful bastard. "I know, this has to end. Make it at worth it. Give us both something worth remembering."

Sirius turned, rising, and kissed him, a wild, desperate, almost violent kiss, all pressing lips and colliding noses. He didn't know how to do this, and rushed, so he wouldn't lose his momentum and

remember how scared he was. But Snape calmed him down, catching his hands, directing them, taking the lead and making Sirius believe, he wasn't completely lost.

"It's okay" he whispered in between softer kisses. "You can do it."

Sirius wanted to believe him, so badly. Wanted to have this one perfect thing, before his life went to hell again. He felt his breath catch and his hands shiver, but he didn't back off, tried his best to stay, to remain in the open, even when it scared him witless. Snape's hands were on his shoulders, dipping below the collar and finding bare skin, like he had done so often and this time, Sirius mirrored him. He couldn't tell anymore, if his heart was about to burst from anxiety, excitement or joy now. All he could do was follow Snape's voice, Snape's lead. "This is good, just like that. Just you and me, nothing else."

Nothing else. No expectation, reputation, indignation. Nothing else. Sirius wanted, needed to believe that, despite his experience pointing right to the contrary. And when they sank down, side by side, all exposed skin, too close to the other to feel the cold, it worked like a charm, warding off reality for just long enough.

Severus couldn't believe he had ever made it that far, but now that he had, he couldn't get enough. The first rush of passion had been intense, if short, streaked with panic and insecurities, much like everything he had shared with Sirius Black. And after that with nothing to run for, no one to look after them, they had all the time in the world to stay. To explore each other's bodies in breathless silence, not daring to disturb the little bubble of peace that sheltered them from the outside world. Black had been gentle and sweet and almost reverent, anxious to do something wrong, anxious to miss even the slightest details.

His experience showed, but also his fear. How scared he was to do something wrong, to hurt, to upset, to expose himself. It was more than just one step to let Severus see him, touch him, feel him. It was everything, and he only did it, because they were running out of time. But that made all the beauty of it, beyond the raw, animal need. How he strained himself for Severus, tried his best to be strong enough, trusting enough, even when his heart fluttered like a caged bird.

It ended as it usually did, the panic getting the better of him, tiring him out until he could hold on no more. And maybe that was the best part. Conjuring a blanket and pulling Black close, holding him, warming him, while he was asleep. He loved that most. In those times he could almost believe they built some kind of trust between them, something that could last beyond the stolen moments, when neither of their peers, their respective sides in this not quite yet war were looking. Of course it was a vain hope, neither Black nor himself particularly trusting personalities in the first place. But hope was a fickle beast, it wouldn't just disappear because it wasn't wanted nor

needed nor appropriate.

And so he continued to hold the other, petted his skin, marveled in the feeling of closeness neither of them deserved nor wanted, but needed so desperately.

Chapter 8

Sirius had never before even imagined this kind of intimacy was possible, with what little time he had with... Severus, before he was forced back into being Snape to him, every second was precious, was important. The mealtimes, the times where people could see aside, they never not touched. They sat side by side for their homework, their legs touching, when they did homework, even in the library, hidden in some forsaken corner, behind the most powerful notice-me-not they could create. They sat opposite to each other, hands entwined, when they talked. They lay curled into each other like petals in a bud, when they weren't.

Severus was gentle and patient, talking Sirius through any trace of panic, soothing over the twitches of fear with hands and lips and eyes. Sirius tried to be gentle and patient too, but it wasn't in his nature. He was greedy and urgent and eager, but Severus didn't seem to mind.

What they shared, was the same sense of wonder, the same dread for the passing of time. What they shared were long stretches of silence, each following his own thoughts in the reassuring embrace of the other, were kisses full of sweet innocence and nameless despair. They shared more than kisses a few more times, but not even close to what one would have expected. It was nice, but not as important as other things, which was saying a lot for two teenage boys.

The evening before the train would return, bringing back reality at the heels of their friends and peers, Sirius could no longer pretend to forget about the outside world. They were sitting on one of the galleries, their feet dangling down through the banister, shoulder to shoulder, thigh to thigh. "I don't want this to end..."

Severus nodded. "I know. But there's not much of a choice, is it?" His hand found Sirius' and squeezed it. "I don't want it either."

"I owe you a proper goodbye" Sirius stated sadness tainting his voice, his eyes slowly filling with tears.

Severus pulled his legs up and tugged them under, before turning, his chest melting against Sirius' side. "You don't owe me anything anymore." He breathed deeply, as if he could smell Sirius and wanted to memorize it. "You are forgiven. More than. In fact..." he stopped, his head bumping softly against Sirius ear. "Thank you for the last days. I never thought it possible, something like that could happen to me."

Sirius now turned to, feeling weak and helpless against the wave of emotions running through him. He almost choked on the words as long as he had to face these dark, almost obsidian eyes, so he lowered his head and rested his forehead against Severus shoulder. The familiar protection made it easier, if not simple. "You... deserve that. You are... not like that. Yet." He knew, Severus could hear, what he couldn't say. 'But I am. Dark, twisted, deviant. A disgrace, a nuisance, often a menace.'

Severus' hands found his nape, stroking with firm, movements that slowly wiped away the tension. "You do too." He laughed lightly. "In fact you are pretty decent."

Sirius laughed too, but it wasn't far from sobbing. "Decent is not quite, what I'd call you." He coughed. "Don't get yourself killed, okay? When... you know..."

Severus grimaced. "And you." His hands scooted lower, over Sirius' back. "Potter's lot will get you killed, when the Dark Lord rises."

Sirius sighed. "I'm used to that kind of trouble. While you aren't. And... Reg isn't either. Watch out for him, if you can, will you?"

Severus had a chuckle. "I thought you hated your brother." And hadn't Sirius done everything to make it look like it, even for Regulus?

"Well... I do, but that's family. You hate them, you still cover their backs." Sirius shrugged. It was a good distraction and he wanted to linger, wanted to think about that and not... "I can't say goodbye, but I have to."

Severus forced his face up, met his eyes. "Then don't. Say... until later." He didn't look so bad now, the pale skin more like china and less like cheap foggy glass.

"That's just a sham, lying to yourself. Out there, by tomorrow, we are enemies again." Sirius hated to face bitter truths, but he was used to it.

But so was Severus. "It doesn't change who we are and what we had. I wanted you to remember. And you will. And I will. So don't get killed, yes?"

Sirius nodded and stood up, only barely delaying the inevitable. "I have something for you." Sheepishly he reached into his pocket and produced a shrunk, rather worn book about counterurses, one that had come so handy over the course of his life, he practically knew it by heart. "Here."

Severus reached for it and studied the title and then the first pages. "Shouldn't you keep that for yourself?"

Sirius laughed and shrugged. "I have other copies. But if you deal with dark families, you better get prepared."

The Slytherin nodded his thanks without saying it, then sheepishly smiled. "I have something for you too." On Sirius questioning look he added nervously: "It's not much, really." He took a vial out of his pocket and explained then: "It's looks and smells like the Draught of the living death. But you wake up from it on your own, might come handy, if you have to... play dead."

Sirius didn't know, what to tell him, how to say anything to it really. It was a gift he hadn't even imagined. It was the wrong way to say nothing at all, but what else could he do? "I better get going."

Severus wasn't willing to let him go like that. He stood up too, giving him a last firm kiss. "Goodbye, Sirius, or rather: until next time." He gave a thin smile then turned and slowly walked to the stairs that would bring him back to the dungeons. And away from the last few days. And all Sirius could do was not running after him.

The first days were the hardest, seeing his Sirius absorbed with Potter, turning slowly, ever so slowly back into just Black. Looking sad and empty alright, but distant, untouchable. Ever breaking but never broken. Now that he could see it, was no longer blinded by hatred and fear.

For a few times he thought, they could go back to before, to hating each other and ignoring everything there was. When Potter's laughter turned cruel and Black's seemed to follow. When a hex hit him out of nowhere and he supposed, hoped, it was from them. He could live with that ignorant cruelty, that aloof meanness. But it wasn't there.

Black was silent around him, stirred his cronies the other way, found something to occupy them until they forgot about Severus. And never, ever looked. Not even, when he could have, without being caught. Severus could have taken it an insult. But the truth was so much worse, really, and he was aware of it, because he felt the same. It hurt too much. Just looking already burned his heart and guts like fiendfyre.

At least after a while things died down a bit. As winter turned into spring and spring slowly into summer he could almost pretend it had never happened, and Potter and Black had just magically forgotten about him. And maybe this time, the summer holidays would clear his thoughts completely, for this time he wouldn't go back to the desolate blandness of Spinner's end, with a father who slowly drank himself to death and a neighborhood that very much aimed for the same, only that it didn't use alcohol but industrial fumes. This time he was invited into the houses of Slytherins, learning to know the best of the best of wizardingkind, at least according to their own claims, the pure-blood circles that surrounded the Dark Lord.

Severus had no illusions what had bought him these invitations. It was neither his good looks nor his mother's heritage. As a half-blood, she could be practically royalty and he still wouldn't be more than tolerable. It was his potion genius and fast intellect. It was his willingness to do the necessary and a certain talent for cruelty. It was all the things that made his connection to Black futile and lost, never to be salvaged. This summer would, had to kill, what was left.

The Christmas holidays should have been a proper warning, but so much had happened since then, he had forgotten. He hadn't thought about so many other things, each worse than the last, he had simply forgotten. But now he was back and it all the same. Maybe it was worse.

They had Narcissa over. And Bellatrix.

Each of them was bad in her own way. Narcissa was the very picture of pure-blood composure and finesse, but she was a cold fish. As convincing as the yearly ministerial speech. She could sit around all she wanted in her indignation and tell him, what a disgrace his stubbornness was, he simply didn't care.

Bellatrix was less coherent. She didn't think in such categories. They had once been close, had bonded over their shared inclination to feel with an intensity unknown to most people. It was both his saving graces and his most intense pain. It was another painful memory tilted in its hinges by the knowledge he had gained. He didn't want to lose the connection he had with her, didn't want to disappoint her, but she had drifted away to the point that she wasn't all sane anymore. Her conviction was manic. And he wasn't. Couldn't be.

It was the warning he needed and that made him prepare: put everything he couldn't leave behind into one bag, collect what money he could, visited all the things he wanted to memorize one last time.

Chapter 9

It had its perks to be both very young and not very reputable. Like house-elves and shop assistants one tended to be near invisible. One tended to hear and see things that weren't intended for one's eyes and ears in the first place and Severus was a good observer. He soon figured out, the Lestranges – all three – and the Malfoys were in high honor with the Dark Lord. He knew Voldemort flirted with the werewolves and other dark creatures but didn't intend to give them much. As long as the man could promise better conditions than the ministry, and that was near nothing, they would still listen. He found the death eaters were recruiting at full force, not only Slytherins but all kinds of people, everyone graduated, meaning, he would have to wait another two years.

It seemed such a long time, when all he wanted was to belong, to be fully accepted, one of them. But then there was this one thing, he really, really didn't want to find out about.

“Of course, there are special rules for Blacks!” Bartemius Crouch, the younger, had complained to one Selwyth or the other. “They get to join early!”

Severus had been there on accident and tried to leave without drawing attention, but stopped, when Selwyth answered: “At least he is of age already. They say, though, he is rather difficult. Maybe the Dark Lord will not take him, after all.” A shiver ran over him. Even with no names, he could tell, who they were talking about. And just then, Lucius Malfoy stepped in and grinned. “Don't you underestimate the power of persuasion. Black will do his part as any of you.” It was as neutral a description as it could get, but it hit Severus like a stab. Malfoy's glee was nothing short of sadistic.

Severus kept to himself and pretended he hadn't been paying attention, but felt the deep need to do something, to keep Sirius Black safe despite the fact that he was equally without protection.

Sirius was sitting by the window, blowing the ashes of the letter out. *Be careful, they will try to*

force you. No shit. He could still feel the aftershocks of the last attempt of “convincing” him. Sending an owl had been insanely dangerous and foolish, but it was endearing too, even when Severus really couldn't help him at all.

The best he could do now was pretend he had never received the letter and the bird had carried a letter from James or something like that. And hope, no one else had seen something. Regulus tended to be damn nosy these days.

He turned, when someone came up the stairs, ready to jump back into his room, although it was gloomy at that time of the day and he much preferred the warmth of the window sill, but it was just Alphard, who had come over for a talk and probably a glass with his father. Alphard was harmless. Wasn't interested in politics but always a good sport. He had never been reprimanded by his uncle, especially not violently, quite in difference to uncle Cygnus, who had even higher standards than his mother.

So Sirius remained in his place and leaned back, hoping to catch some of the nice warm summer sun. Maybe they would let him go to one of the manors or cottages later in summer, though he doubted, it would be the Potter's. Unexpectedly Alphard leaned against the wall next to him and watched him quizzically, and without a word too. Sirius started to feel uneasy under the rigorous attention and shifted his weight, ready to leave belatedly.

“Stop.” Alphard's warm voice held no anger but a lot of insistence. “Stay with me for a moment.”

Sirius looked up to him curiously but remained in place. “What do you want?”

Without explanation Alphard reached down and traced the line of his shoulders with a hand without touching. It made Sirius' tension rise, so he could feel the remnants of the curses that hit him in the past days even more clearly. “How is your summer, nephew?” Alphard asked, hidden undertones whispering in his words.

Sirius shrugged. “The usual? I tried to gain permission to visit some friends...” It was as neutral as he could only get.

Alphard took his hand and turned the palm up, putting something into it, then closing his fingers around it. “Don't wait for permission.” He leaned down and huffed a kiss to his forehead, before withdrawing and leaving in a hurry.

Sirius watched dumbstruck. This wasn't just extraordinary, it was unheard of. He looked down at the thing, Alphard had given him, an old-fashioned stone-carved key, covered in runes and ancient magic. The realization of what it was, hit him like a stupefy. He wanted to... drop it. To run after his uncle and thank him, to... cry. In the end he did nothing like that. Methodically he retrieved all his things from their respective hiding places and strolled with them into the garden. A last look back to the house, then he sat on his broom and started.

He had hoped, no one had seen it, but he wasn't that lucky. A few curses flew passed him, their colorful volleys near invisible in the late afternoon light, and then one struck. Sirius held onto his broom and sped up, until he was at safe distance. And then further. Somewhere out there was James. James who would be expecting him. Who had allowed him to come back over the summer, who was safe and who might have an idea, what to do next.

It was the best summer Severus had had, ever since his fallout with Lily, and maybe even before that. The lingering unease never fully left but he could forget about it most of the time. When older, pure-blood wizards asked for his opinion or purposefully included him into their doings, it felt too good to let the opportunity slip just because Black had other opinions. Sure, the Dark Lord's agenda would make some sacrifices necessary, but Black had never been at the receiving end of muggle cruelty, had never known how it felt to be different, not to belong.

Severus had finally found a place, where people appreciated his abilities instead of demonizing it. Where his prowess counted more than his looks. He wouldn't let Blacks familial problems sour it for him. He knew the right people and the right customs, what could go wrong with that?

Black, very obviously didn't have the same good summer. He looked so tired, standing by Potter's side in King's Cross. Pale, haunted. Severus had very clearly chosen the right side, and he had been wrong.

Part of Severus was sad because of it. He would have liked to find a common ground, would have wanted to share something with him, not quite what they had, that wasn't possible under the circumstances, but... something. He would have liked to talk from time to time. Told him about the things he had seen and done, the new kinds of magic, he had seen and learned.

But either of them had chosen their path and couldn't or wouldn't turn their back on it. All that remained was the memory.

It was a hard year, keeping his head down, because he couldn't afford to be out in the open, but it was also an intense year. Sirius knew, he was groomed for war, but he took up knowledge and ability with pleasure. It was the one thing, he was really good at, nearly no one could outsmart him in dueling.

Certainly not Peter, nor most of the other present or future members of what they called "the Order of Phoenix", not even Remus or James. Nothing could replace a childhood of learning in that regard. It made Sirius feel good. Useful.

For a change not just the black sheep, not the waste of time and effort, just the misfit. He was the star pupil, he performed at his best. And wasn't that worth something? The friendly rivalry with James also reinforced their bond that was already closer than it had ever been before... dropping half dead at someone's doorstep did that to them. And James' trust helped smooth over a lot of rough edges.

Even over the fact that he never got really close to Remus again. The one night where he had failed had burned just too many bridges between them to rebuild trust again. It was okay, he could still live with it, as long as Remus could live with him. As long as basic trust remained.

When the four of them graduated, they knew what they were up to. The terrors of the war facing opponents, who would not hesitate to kill and torture them, as they did to the innocent people they got hold of. The dread of fighting a by far stronger opponent. The tiny splinters of hope for a better future.

They thought, they were ready. And maybe it was a good thing, they didn't know they weren't.

Severus was good at what he was doing, and it saved him from a lot of problems. Powerful people held their hands over him. No one bothered him on his NEWTs and right after he had the chance for some really influential connections.

Apprenticeship with the best potion masters, solicited by pure-blood families who wouldn't have even looked at him, if it wasn't for his connection to the death eaters. Voldemort's personal potioneer, equipped with all the means for his own research, and he had a lot of ideas for that.

Sure, it wasn't all nice, things like this always came with a price tag. The Dark Mark for once was painful in ways that exceeded mere physical pain. He imagined it was like the pain Black felt, when he was touched. Something he wanted so badly it hurt him to receive it. But the comparison felt dirty, when he thought about it.

Severus was ambitious, eager, angry at the world for denying him, what he wanted. He didn't want the Mark, but what it represented to him. Gaining respect, recognition, his place in society. Belonging somewhere, not because he was tolerated, but because he had earned his place. Comparing that to the innocent, raw need of human contact felt like destroying something beautiful. And it made Severus feel guilty.

He felt even more guilty, when he couldn't keep his hands out of the more... difficult parts of working for Lord Voldemort anymore. He did get, what he wanted. But the price was steep. And in the end, he realized, he would always remain the pathetic, dirt-poor half-blood that was merely tolerated in the game of big boys. Because he was needed.

Sirius didn't even know why he had written the message, didn't know if it had reached its destination, had been well received or not at all. He didn't know what he expected and he didn't know what to do, if... things went like they rightfully were supposed to. That he would wait and wait and stay alone until he gave up on waiting.

All he did know was that he needed *something*. Anything really, or he would break, and he really couldn't afford that, now that things went to hell. Now that the Prewett twins were dead, the McKinnons too. Now that James and Lily had to go into hiding, that each time they faced the death eaters dying was a likely option. Now that they were at war.

All of that made this even less sane, of course, but he knew he had to, or he would burst, tear himself open on questions that would never have an answer. And so he waited. And waited, ready to fight, ready to flee, ready to die, when the door finally opened. "Snape."

The years hadn't been kind to the kid he had known. The kid he still *was*, barely out of school. His face was no longer just pale but sallow. His long-fingered hands looked spidery and covered in small burns and bruises. The eyes were hard and unforgiving, reminding Sirius of shards of obsidian.

Sirius didn't dare reach out to that nor to the harsh tone of Snape's voice. "Whom did you expect, Black?"

He merely shrugged, staying in his place, seemingly relaxed in the face of looming danger. "Everything from no one to a full-fledged death eater attack." Under the stare of Snape's newly acquired disdain his conviction to at least try to talk faltered. "It's been a while."

"Two years" Snape stated.

"Almost three" Sirius corrected. He felt unable to say more than a few chopped of words and Snape didn't seem interested in more.

"Then why now?" His tone was brittle and cold. Why was he even here, when he didn't want to know the answer?

"I heard... Of Reg." He couldn't help the almost squeak at the end, nor the biting his lips to suppress more than that.

Snape nodded in silent understanding, his hard eyes looking Sirius up and down so he felt dissected. "Are you even sure, I can still... help?"

Sirius shook his head. "I'm not." A nervous shiver ran over his body at the thought of what would happen otherwise.

"Let's find out, shall we?" He pressed his mouth and eyes shut, when Snape stepped close, reaching for him with still rough hands. The first touch felt like a jolt of electricity, painful in its intensity, but it wasn't fear that made his body want to collapse, but grief, despair.

He inhaled, the shuddering breath so close to tears and sobs that Snape looked up to him, then came even closer, embraced him, held him, felling warmer, more soothing, safer than he had any right to. "Did..." he swallowed, forcing his voice into submission. "Did you do it?"

It bore witness of the horrors he had faced, that he found solace in the scraping of Snape's nails over his scalp, *before* he ever got an answer to the question, as Snape hesitated. "No... It wasn't me." He dropped small kisses on Sirius' skin, comforting little touches, meant to show a compassion that only ever existed between them in the silences between words. "If I knew who it was, I'd give their heads to you on a silver platter."

Sirius threw his head back and then tears started falling, unstoppable, sobbing breaking away from his chest as he was ripped apart by his feelings. "I don't want their heads. I want my brother back!"

Snape caught him, held him, waited in silence, only his breath whispering in Sirius hair, until the flood calmed. "I should have... taken better care of him. I knew he was important to you."

Sirius shook his head. "Some things aren't possible anymore. Reminds me... stay out of my way. Out there." He allowed himself to rest his hands on Snape's shoulders, to pull him closer, to savor the long-missed touch.

The other didn't seem to mind. Quite the contrary, really. He kissed Sirius lips, his hands starting to wander, making short work of his shirt's buttons. "I heard. You are vicious." His hands' tenderness belied the harsh words, sought out all the tension in Sirius' body to smooth it away. "Death eaters fear to face you."

It forced a small chuckle out of Sirius as he started to find his own way back to Severus' body, forgetting about Snape the death eater. "But I stick to what you told me."

His shirt came off and Severus' shortly after. "What's that?"

Sirius murmured his answer into skin, kisses between each word, each syllable. "That I am not fated to be a murderer. I do not kill." He raised his head, meeting the dark gaze that was no longer cold, but heated with passion. "Though what I do, might actually be worse, handing them over to the DMLE. I'd prefer death over Azkaban."

Severus laughed. It was funny. At least to them. "I will take care to stay out of your way." But laughter and crying were never too far apart to them. "Will you cry for me? When I die?"

Sirius nodded, trying not to start now. "Yeah." He pulled Severus closer, knowing they only had a few hours, before diving back into a world, where they would be enemies, where they would fight each other even kill each other, taking care, no one saw the tears. "And will you cry for me?"

"Only in my head" Severus claimed, committing every muscle, every new scar to memory.

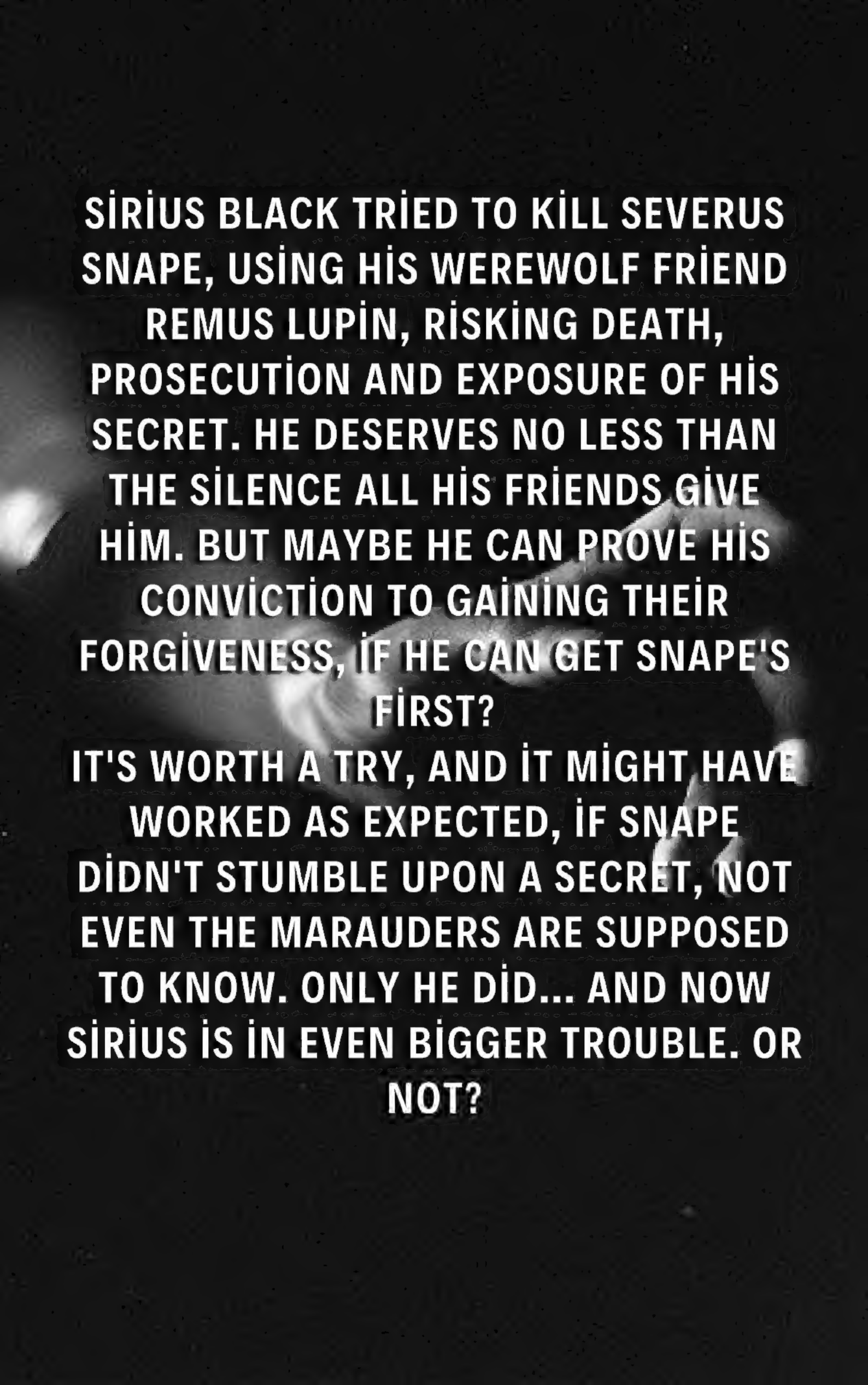
Three years. Three bloody, terrible, *empty* years, without a gentle touch, without even thinking of it. Merlin, he had missed Black. Sirius. He could never admit it, when he was away, it would hurt too much, endanger his position and everything he fought for, but now, here, surrounded by the smell, taste, feel of the man, he had grown into, he could. He had missed his open, willing vulnerability, his sincerity, his... everything.

He had missed the way, Sirius looked at him with gray softness and the way he smiled, just a little, when he wasn't thinking about it. He had missed the lack of embarrassment when Sirius cried, and the shame, when he became aware of it. He had missed him and still already dreaded he had come, he had woken up the feelings that now clenched his heart like the maw of a dragon. Because he would need to leave him behind again. Tomorrow. In a few hours. Much too soon.

Best not to think of it. To take what was given, lead this man, his lover, to the bed in the shabby hotel room, undress him carefully, to hold him, sleep close to him, not to think of anything, the other wasn't willing to give.

Finding in surprise the other was just as desperate, just as needy as him, his mouth hungry, hands eager. That grief didn't stop the need to be close. That despair didn't strip them of human weaknesses. That the boundaries of their love weren't the same as everyone else's.

The night's comfort were but a flicker of an eye in an ocean of lost time, and before he could even figure out, if it was still "just" the clumsy boyish love they had forged in the hidden corners of Hogwarts one Christmas, or something more, something different, he was back out alone in the cold and dark, the morning not yet awoken, the night not yet defeated. They couldn't be seen, couldn't be found out. And maybe it would take another three years, before they met again. Maybe another thirteen. That didn't change, what was buried deep in his heart. Deeper than Lily, deeper than the pains of his childhood, deeper even than the shame of his existence. If Sirius called, he would always be there. And knew with the absolute security of religious belief Sirius would do the same for him.



SIRIUS BLACK TRIED TO KILL SEVERUS SNAPE, USING HIS WEREWOLF FRIEND REMUS LUPIN, RISKING DEATH, PROSECUTION AND EXPOSURE OF HIS SECRET. HE DESERVES NO LESS THAN THE SILENCE ALL HIS FRIENDS GIVE HIM. BUT MAYBE HE CAN PROVE HIS CONVICTION TO GAINING THEIR FORGIVENESS, IF HE CAN GET SNAPE'S FIRST?

IT'S WORTH A TRY, AND IT MIGHT HAVE WORKED AS EXPECTED, IF SNAPE DIDN'T STUMBLE UPON A SECRET, NOT EVEN THE MARAUDERS ARE SUPPOSED TO KNOW. ONLY HE DID... AND NOW SIRIUS IS IN EVEN BIGGER TROUBLE. OR NOT?